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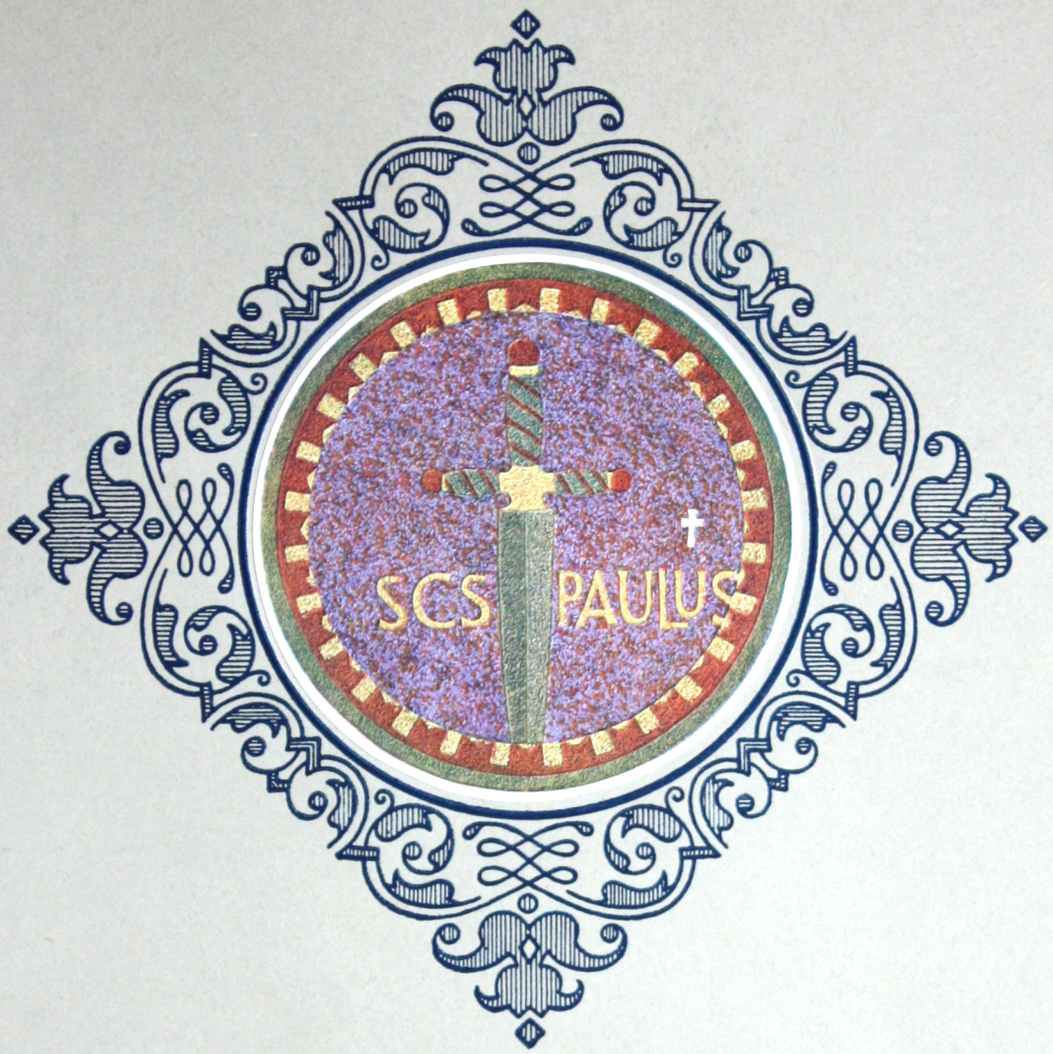

THE CONCRETE OF THE ARCHITECT AND SCULPTOR

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THE CONCRETE OF THE ARCHITECT AND SCULPTOR

by

JOHN J. EARLEY

with an introduction by

LORADO TAFT

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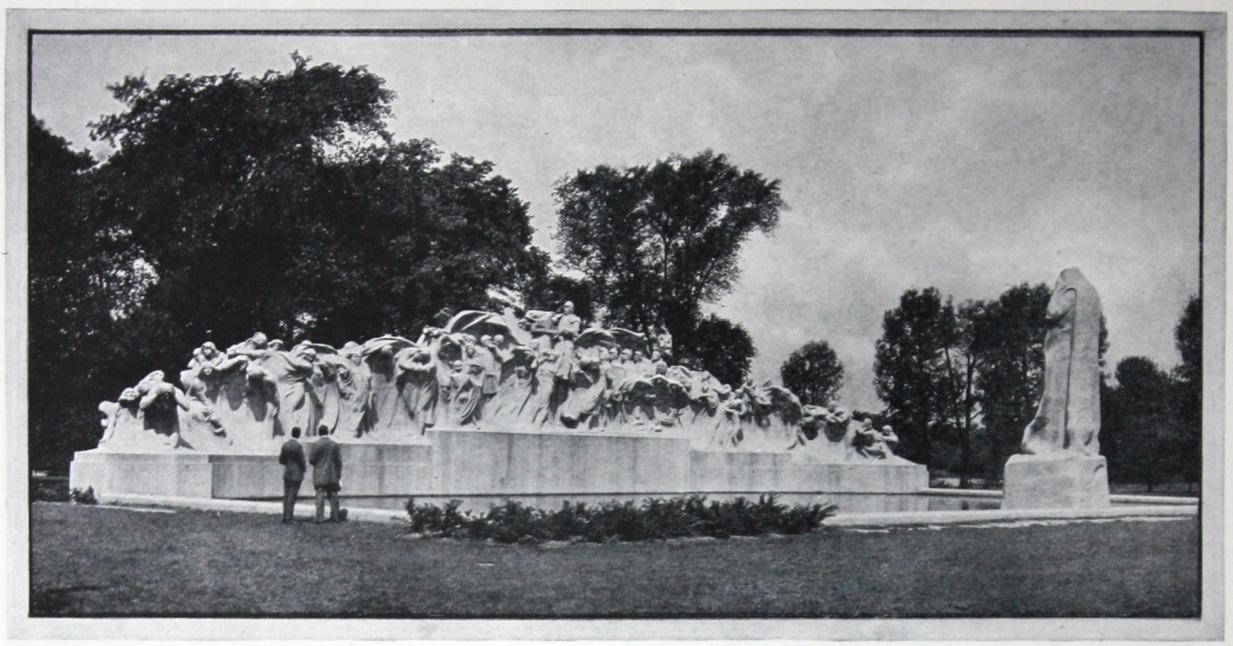

"Time goes, you say? Ah, no,
Alas, time stays; we go."

— AUSTIN DOBSON

A vagrant line emblematic of life's progress, and expressed in sculpture by Lorado Taft as successive waves of humanity breaking at the feet of inscrutable Time has been cast in concrete by John J. Earley.

INTRODUCTION

WE WERE recently asked what is the most hopeful trait in American character and, likewise, what is the most unfortunate one. It seems to me that the first question answers itself: that the most hopeful sign is precisely our hopefulness, and I am inclined to think that our greatest weakness is the natural accompaniment of this quality, i. e. an exaggerated self-confidence, with its attendant disdain for the achievements of others. We have little accumulated wisdom and slight appreciation of the gifts of the ages. Our life is casual, without background. Our houses are on casters like our furniture. Our recreations are hectic — at forty or fifty miles an hour. Our music is jazz; our drama, the movie; our literature, the strident daily. To the other arts we are practically "immune."

How are we to get a sense of duration and permanency into our national consciousness? Is it whimsical to believe that a building material which is beautiful and lasting, and yet inexpensive, might have a considerable influence? That a medium for sculpture which is as flexible as plaster and ultimately as hard as rock might in time not only give a new character to our building arts but very greatly assist in crystallizing American ideals? Replace our ephemeral structures with monoliths as lasting as the Roman Pantheon; give them a plastic treatment of design suited to the material; and American architecture will sound a new and hopeful note.

In sculpture Mr. Earley reproduces with precision the light and shade of the model, but, more than that, without the fatigue and expense of carving, he puts into our products the "hint of eternity" which is the greatest possible asset of monumental art. Add to this his triumphs in color — the potentialities which are opened to the imagination are dazzling and limitless!

Lorado Taft

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"— Can walls as rich in color be produced with concrete as with the rarest marble? Can decorations wrought with the symbols of a mystic faith be done as well with concrete as with mosaics?" —

"— the possibilities of success were fully realized."

— MURPHY *and* OLMSTED, *Architects*

THE CONCRETE OF THE ARCHITECT AND SCULPTOR

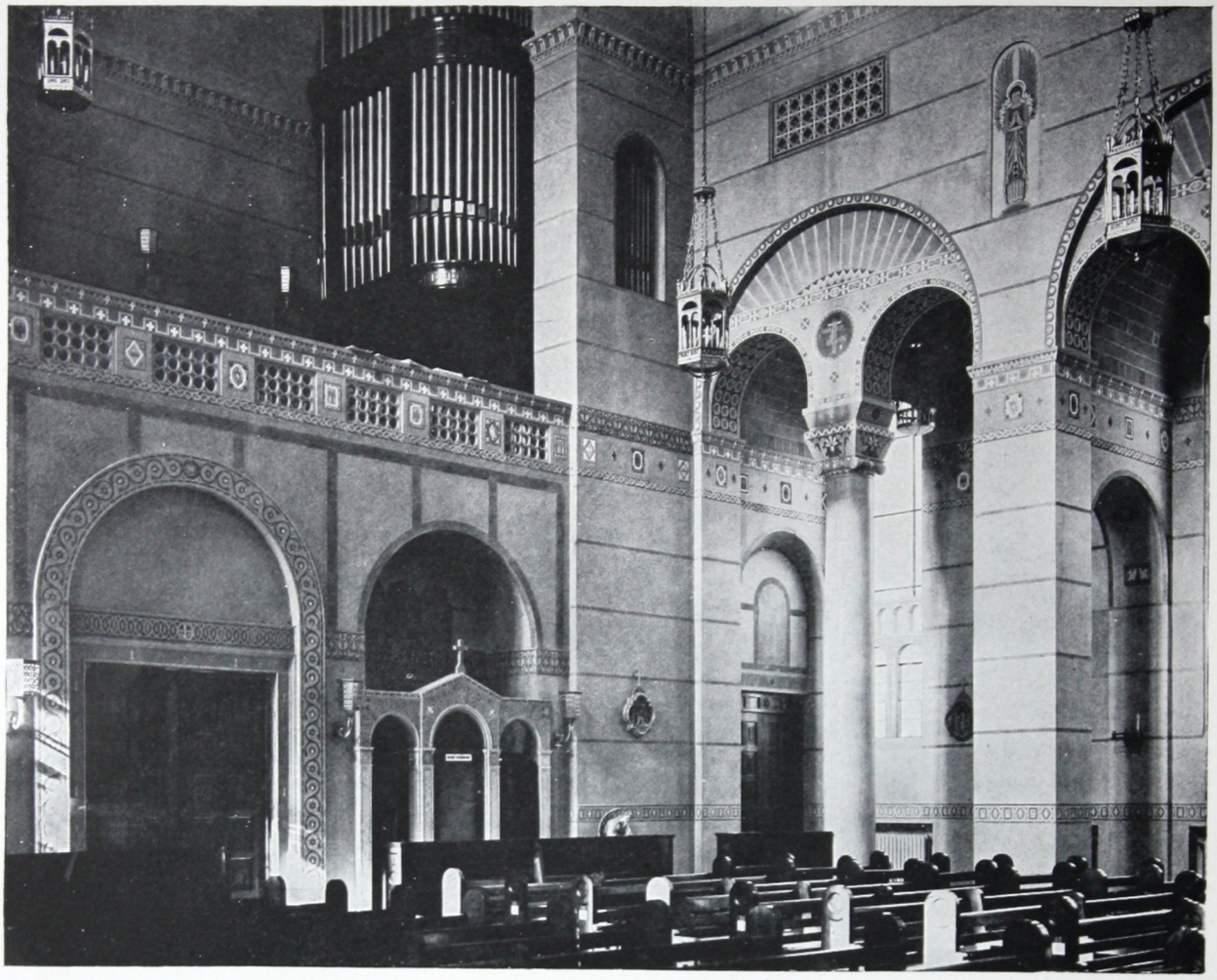
By JOHN J. EARLEY

VERY able men have expressed their gratitude for the invention of cement, which has made concrete possible, and it is easy for me to add my sentiments to theirs and to those who spend their lives and energy in the manufacture of cement. But how many who use concrete as I use it, know the work which has been done to establish concrete in its rightful place in architecture and the allied arts. Stories of extraordinary work done with concrete are becoming more frequent and more definite. From here and there in America and Europe come wonderful stories of artistic achievements with concrete. Coupled with these stories are descriptions of the work and the names of men. Such stories must have aroused in many minds the same interest which has been aroused in architectural and artistic circles, and must have caused many to ask, What does concrete mean to the Architect? What does it mean to the Artist?

Of many questions asked me these are the most persistent: "How did you become interested in concrete? What does concrete mean to you?" And my answer is that while my attention may have been centered on concrete through a more or less fortuitous means, nevertheless, my interest in it was aroused because it is a permanent material, which at the same time is a facile or quick medium, wonderfully flexible, adaptable and complete. It is difficult for me to explain what it means to an artist to have a medium in which final effects may be quickly achieved, and in which both form and color may be adequately and permanently preserved.

One never feels the labor attendant on the conception of ideas. One never regrets the time spent in their development. But there is, has always been, a protest against the hard physical work with which the ideas of an artist are recorded in a permanent material.

At one time in the city of Florence, Italy, there stood a huge block of marble, destined to be a giant figure to adorn the Cathedral; but it had been spoiled by the sculptor. And so it stood for nearly one hundred years, too valuable to throw away, and too irregular in form to be easily



The fulfillment of a trust with concrete. "— it was a test of the fitness of concrete to be an architectural medium, a test of great severity which required of one material — concrete — with its own peculiar technique, what had hitherto been required of many materials with as many techniques."
— J. J. E.

used. It belonged to the Operai of the Cathedral, the Commissioners of Works, and from them Michael Angelo Buonarotti, seeing possibilities in this misshapen piece of stone, obtained a commission to try his powers upon it. In the writings of Vasari we read that "Michael Angelo made a model in wax of a young David with a sling, intended for the front of the Palazzo, to show that, as David had defended his people and governed them with justice so whosoever governed that City should boldly defend it and justly govern it; and he began this statue in the works of Santa Maria del Fiore when he made a tower with wood and stone around the marble and worked it out there without being seen by anyone," beginning it in 1501 and completing it in 1504.

I think that this story of the David is one of the most dramatic in the annals of art and at the same time one most fit to serve as an example with which to illustrate my thoughts. Michael Angelo, after he had conceived the idea of his David and had thoroughly worked it out in a model with wax, spent three years in a frenzy of work driven by his impetuous nature and his desire to translate his design into a permanent material. I am convinced that if such a man had known concrete as we know it he would have filled the world with his work.

The labor attendant on the execution of works of art has continued undiminished until our day. There is only one exception, the relief afforded by the genius of Luca Della Robbia when he learned how to make glazed terra cotta serve his purpose. In the history of his life we read the same protest of the artist against useless, blighting labor. It says, "His fertile genius ever seeking for new means of expression could not rest content with the slow production of works in bronze and marble. Some easier, less costly material was needed for the more prompt and spontaneous expression of those countless forms of beauty which thronged upon his vision, and it is Luca's glory to have discovered an art exactly suited to his wants."

You will recall a similar experience which befell our modern sculptor, Lorado Taft, who having completed the model of his extraordinary theme "The Fountain of Time," found himself unable to reproduce it in an acceptable and permanent material because of the great labor that such a work would be. Three years ago Mr. Taft said that had it not been for concrete his monument would surely have been lost. He said: "The fact is we were cornered; we were up against it. The monument had grown to be so long, so high, so complicated that I couldn't even get a bid on the carving of it." Then speaking of the completed monument he said, "But when I found that the aggregate . . . . produced an effect which, in surface, is like the treatment we used to study so diligently in Paris, when I found that I was going to get that color, I was more than delighted and even then I was not prepared for the beautiful result which has come to me. There is not a stone that America produces — not a material, even Tennessee marble — that I would prefer to the color and effect we have produced in 'The Fountain of Time'."

We in the studio are able to sympathize not only with the sculptor but with the architect, for the architect suffers from the same evils and in proportion to the complexity of his project.

When the interior decorations of the Shrine of the Sacred Heart at Washington were submitted to me by Murphy and Olmsted, the architects,

The Nashville Parthenon is a replica of the famous Athenian Parthenon. Every detail of the beauty of the original will be preserved in concrete for those who may not go to Athens. This building will stand through time as a tribute to the materials and craftsmen of today.

The stately symmetry of the ancient columns has been faithfully reproduced. The soft buff color of the concrete is not unlike the present color of the original marble.

The ability of concrete to express the wealth of sculptured detail in the pediment and frieze is shown here. No restraint was placed on the sculptor by concrete.

for execution in concrete, it was a test of the fitness of concrete to be an architectural medium, a test of great severity which required of one material—concrete—with its own peculiar technique what had hitherto been required of many materials with as many techniques. But in addition, this appeal to concrete by the architects was again the protest of the artist against the restraining influence on his art of excessive labor, of excessive cost and of unkind materials.

These architects raised no question with me about the permanence of concrete nor the structural value of concrete, all of which they knew. But this is what they asked: "Can walls as rich in color be produced with concrete as with the rarest marble? Can decorations wrought with the symbols of a mystic faith be done as well with concrete as with mosaics? And if so, can they be done with a reasonable amount of labor? Can a modern congregation building a temple in which to worship God write its faith upon the walls with all that splendor in which the same faith was written on the walls of San Vitale and San Marco?"

The state of mind with which these architects approached their problem and the satisfaction which they experienced with its solution are

reflected in the following from Mr. Murphy. He says: "For the interpretation of the interior decorations this principle was established, namely: that no imitation would be permitted. Every effort was made to avoid invading the province of one material with another, because it was desired that the result finally obtained should be judged upon its own merit, and not on merit obtained through reminiscence of historic examples executed in totally different materials.

"The broad use of color on the interior was suggested by the extensive areas of the walls, vaults and dome, which in the Romanesque period were decorated through the free use of rare marbles and mosaics, rich in color and interest. These materials are no longer available for such large areas within the limits of permissible cost, but the decorative need remains. For we still feel that walls should be covered with an enduring material of such character as to express the elements of design — piers, columns and arches.

"In the search for materials that might ably render with permanence the complicated decorative detail desired on the interior, concrete, which through a new technique has been made an architectural medium of the highest order, was carefully considered and finally adopted. No hesitancy was felt because of the nature of concrete, for it was frankly accepted as a strong, durable and structurally satisfactory material. The problem was whether concrete through a new technique, would be sufficiently versatile to yield all the intricate detail and variety of color necessary to successfully carry out the design. Precedent of a rich and varied nature was unavailable; little too, was gained by a perusal of the documents on the subject. The failure could be great, but the possibilities of success were most liberal and were fully realized."

The entrance to Trinity Lutheran Church in Washington, D. C., a bit of Romanesque detail executed in concrete and in it concrete has met every architectural requirement both in form and color.

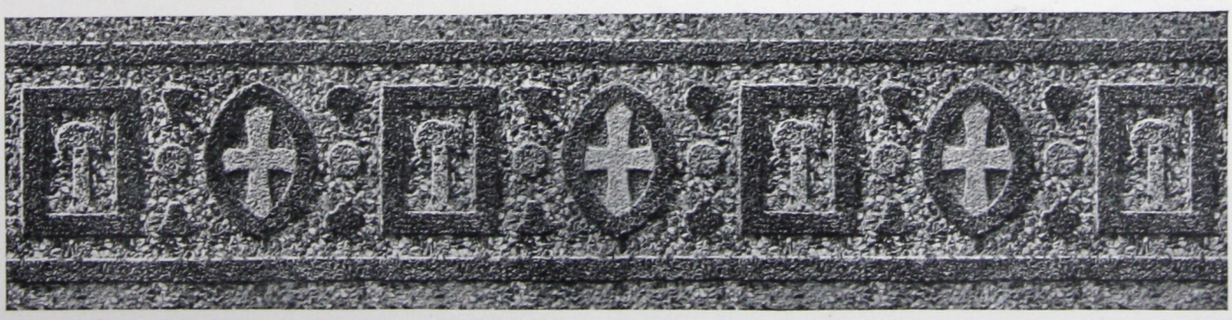
Completeness may be attributed to concrete in another sense than that in which I have just used it. Concrete is fully as complete structurally as it is artistically. There is in Chicago a great stadium in the making. I do not know exactly how it compares with the largest or the most important of such structures; but I am sure that it is of the same order as the most important whether ancient or modern. In this structure concrete is used as a complete material. It forms foundations and superstructures filling every need whether structural or decorative.

I can recall ancient structures of equal importance, of similar and dissimilar character built in the years just before or after the beginning of the Christian Era, whose foundations were one material, whose superstructures were another and whose architectural finishes were many; also I can recall but cannot understand modern structures built by these ancient methods.

Recently I visited one of our large modern cathedrals, now under construction. It is being built by the same methods and with the same materials as was the Coliseum at Rome, but I noticed with more than ordinary interest that skewed arches and such forms were reinforced concrete. Certainly if concrete is valuable in these places it is valuable elsewhere and, had the designer been of that mind, it might have been used generally with benefit to all.

As a mountain stream dammed by a fallen tree rises, and rises slowly but surely until sufficient power has been accumulated to sweep away the obstacle, so, works great and small, well done with concrete, will accumulate day by day until the prestige of concrete has developed power enough to sweep away all that is in the way of its natural advancement to its place in architecture and in art as the most satisfying medium which has yet been devised.

This band of color from the walls of the Shrine of the Sacred Heart illustrates a freedom of design no longer economical with any other material. Motifs such as these and typifying a symbolism characteristic of the Romano-Byzantine style were used throughout.



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